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I am making this submission as a recreational user of alkyl nitrites and the related chemical compounds I shall refer to throughout this submission as “poppers”. It outlines the concerns I have with the proposal to reschedule poppers. In particular, the detrimental effects I believe it will have on my own life and the lives of other people in a community I closely identify with.

**About me**

I am a 41 year-old man who has sex with other men and identifies as both “queer” and “homosexual”. I would consider myself to be a member of the wider “Queer community” – one of the “particular sections of the community” alluded to in Reason E of the interim decision.

**My experience of using poppers**

I’ve used poppers on a regular basis since the age of 18 for the following therapeutic purposes:

- To enhance sexual pleasure.
- To facilitate anal intercourse.
- To enhance the effects of other psychoactive substances.

I have experienced no negative physical effects from taking them in this way. And my use has had no deleterious behavioural, emotional, or psychological effects. In fact, my use of poppers has had an overwhelmingly positive effect on my life. Particularly in terms of the assistance they’ve given me in overcoming my sexual inhibitions, and the physical discomfort of penetrative sex.

**My concerns with the proposed “up-scheduling”**

I realise that the government and its regulatory bodies have a responsibility to reduce harm in terms of the “non-standard” use of chemical compounds. But I also believe very strongly that, in addition to physiological therapeutic value, any decision of this nature should also take into account:

- Psychotherapeutic value.
- Socio-cultural value.
- The (potentially greater) harm to individuals and communities of criminalising non-standard use.

I would like to address each of these in turn:

## Psychotherapeutic value

I believe that the interim decision is contradictory. It asserts that “There are no therapeutic benefits associated with the use of alkyl nitrites other than amyl nitrite...” However, it then proceeds to acknowledge that poppers have “euphoric” and “muscle relaxant” properties. Both of which I would consider to be both physiologically and psychologically therapeutic benefits to individuals with a similar socio-psychological profile to me.

- Like many men who have sex with men, I suffer from sexual inhibitions that I directly attribute to an institutionalised social stigma around my sexual preferences that I have encountered throughout my life. I grew up in a protestant Christian culture that criminalised the “promotion” of homosexuality in schools and which enforced legislation that actively discriminated against homosexuals.
- Also, like many men who have sex with men, on occasion I experience pain during penetrative sex.
- And like the vast majority of people, my psychological wellbeing is directly affected by the levels of pleasure and pain I feel.

These are three very clear therapeutic benefits that I feel should carry more weight in this decision.

## Socio-cultural value

The interim decision states that the “misuse and abuse of alkyl nitrites appears to be in *particular sections of the community* rather than widespread.” Which suggests that any restrictions on their availability will adversely affect certain sub-cultures<sup>1</sup> more than others.

On that basis (and in the absence of any evidence of significant secondary social harm), I would argue that the affected communities have a right to greater representation in this decision than non-affected parties.

Gay men have used the various chemical compounds referred to as “poppers” since at least the 1970s. Wikipedia gives a good description<sup>2</sup> of this historical context, and articulates the specific socio-cultural role they have played.

I would argue that restricting access to a therapeutic substance that has such specific socio-cultural significance not only unfairly disadvantages the queer community, but could also contribute to the continued statistical over-representation<sup>3</sup> of gay men in the rates of suicide, self-harm and all psychological disorders.

## The negative physical and psychological effects of criminalising self-medication

If harm reduction is the real objective, then the TGA must acknowledge the fact that there is very little evidence to support the opinion that criminalising drug use reduces either harm or availability. In 2001, Portugal became the first country to decriminalise all drugs. Seventeen years later, it has the second lowest reported rate of drug-related deaths in the EU<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/poppers-how-gay-culture-bottled-a-formula-that-has-broken-down-boundaries-a6828466.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poppers>

<sup>3</sup> <https://lgbtihealth.org.au/statistics/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/portugal-decriminalised-drugs-14-years-ago-and-now-hardly-anyone-dies-from-overdosing-10301780.html>

In fact, the prevailing consensus is that conservative drug policies cause *increased* psychological and physical harm with no significant reduction in usage. The most relevant ones in this case are probably:

- The psycho-social harm of being branded a criminal for indulging in behaviour that has no significant secondary effects.
- The adverse social and economic implications of getting a criminal record.
- The increased risk of exposure to counterfeit compounds that don't necessarily meet safety and quality standards.
- The increased dependency on criminal gangs caused by forcing people to resort to the "black market".
- The physical and psychological damage criminalisation could cause to a subculture that has been systematically persecuted and disenfranchised by State and Commonwealth governments since federation.

In conclusion, I would urge the TGA to reconsider this decision until it has taken all considerations into account, and consulted more broadly with the communities and subcultures that will be most significantly affected by any scheduling changes.

Yours sincerely

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